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POPULAR TALES.

From Blackwood's Magazine.

ADVENTURES IN TEXAS.

No. I.

A Scamper in the Prairie of Jacinto.

Readers! Were you ever in a Texan prairie? Probably not. I have been; and this was how it happened. When a very young man, I found myself one fine morning possessor of a Texas land-scrip—that is to say, a certificate of the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company, in which it was stated, that in consideration of the sum of one thousand dollars, duly paid and delivered by Mr. Edward Rivers into the hands of the cashier of the aforesaid company, he, the said Edward Rivers, was become entitled to ten thousand acres of Texan land, to be selected by himself or those he should appoint, under the sole condition of not infringing on the property or rights of the holders of previously given certificates.

Ten thousand acres of the finest land in the world, and under a heaven compared to which our Maryland sky, bright as it is, appears dull and foggy! It was a tempting bait—to good a one not to be caught at by many in those times of speculation; and accordingly, our free and enlightened citizen bought and sold their millions of Texas acres just as readily as they did their thousands of acres and villages in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, and their tens of thousands of acres in banks and railways. It was a temptation, however, which has since, we may hope, been in some degree, cured. At any rate, the remedies applied have been tolerable severe.

I had not escaped the contagion, and, having got the land on paper, I thought I should like to see it in dirty acres; so in company with a friend, who had a similar venture, I embarked at Baltimore on board the *Catcher* schooner, and after a three weeks voyage arrived in Galveston Bay. The grassy shores of this bay, into which the river Brazos empties itself, rise so little above the surface of the water, to which they bear a strong resemblance in color, that it would be difficult to discover where they were not for three stunted trees growing on the western extremity of a long lizard-shaped island that stretches nearly sixty miles across the bay, and conceals the mouth of the river. These trees are the only landmark for the mariner; and, with their exception, not a single object—not a hill, a house, nor so much as a bush, betrays the level sameness of the island and adjacent continent.

After we had with some difficulty, got on the inner side of the island, a pilot came on board and took charge of the vessel. The first thing he did was to run us on a sandbank, off which we got with no small labour, and by the united exertions of sailors and passengers, at length entered the river. In our impatience to land, I and my friend left the schooner in a cockleshell of a boat, which upset in the surge, and we found ourselves floundering in the water. Luckily it was not very deep, and we escaped with a thorough drenching.

When we had scrambled on shore, we gazed about us for some time before we could persuade ourselves that we were actually upon land. It was, without exception, the strangest coast we had ever seen, and there was scarcely a possibility of distinguishing the boundary between earth and water. The green grass grew down to the edge of the green sea, rolling in waves before each puff of the sea-breeze, with neither tree, nor house, nor hill, to vary the monotony of the surface. Ten or twelve miles toward the north and north-west, we distinguished some dark masses, which we afterward discovered to be groups of trees; but to our eyes they looked exactly like islands in a green sea, and we subsequently learned that they were called islands by the people of the country. It would have been difficult to have given them a more appropriate name, or one better describing their appearance.

Proceeding along the shore, we came to a block house situated behind a small tongue of land projecting into the river, and decorated with the flag of the Mexican republic, waving in all its glory from the roof. At that period, this was the only building of which Galveston harbour could boast. It served as customhouse and as barracks for the garrison, also as the residence of the director of customs, and of the civil and military intendant, as head quarters of the officer commanding, and moreover, as hotel and wine and spirit store. Alongside the block house was depicted a sort of hieroglyphic intended for the Mexican eagle, hung a bottle doing duty as a sign, and the republican banner threw its protecting shadow over an announcement of "Brandy, Whiskey, and Accommodation for man and beast."

As we approached the house, we saw the whole

garrison assembled before the door. It consisted of a dozen dwarfish, spindle-shanked Mexican soldiers, none of them so big or half so strong as American boys of fifteen, and whom I would have backed a single Kentucky woodsman, armed with a riding-whip to have driven to the four winds of heaven. Those heroes all sported tremendous beards, whiskers and mustaches, and had a habit of knitting their brows, in the endeavor as we suppose, to look fierce and formidable. They were crowding round a table of rough plank and playing a game of cards, in which they were so deeply engrossed that they took no notice of our approach. Their officer, however, came out of the house to meet us.

Captain Cotton, formerly editor of the *Mexican Gazette*, now civil and military commandant at Galveston, custom-house director, harbor-master and tavern keeper, and a Yankee to boot, seemed to trouble himself very little about his various dignities and titles. He produced some capital French and Spanish wine, which is to be presumed, he got duty free, and welcomed us to Texas. We were presently joined by some of our fellow passengers, who seemed as bewildered as we had been at the billiard-table appearance of the country. Indeed, the place looked so desolate and uninviting, that there was little inducement to remain on *terra firma*; and it was with a feeling of relief that we once more found ourselves on board the schooner.

We took three days to sail up the river Brazos to the town of Brazoria, a distance of thirty miles. On the first day nothing but meadow-land was visible on either side of us; but on the second, the monotonous grass-covered surface was varied by islands of trees, and about twenty miles from the mouth of the river, we passed through a forest of sycamores, and saw several herds of deer and flocks of wild turkeys. At length we reached Brazoria, which, at the time I spoke of, namely, in the year 1832, was an important city—for Texas, that is to say—consisting of upwards of thirty houses, three of which were of brick, three of plank, and the remainder of logs. All the inhabitants were Americans, and the streets arranged in American fashion, in straight line and at right angles. The only objection to the place was, that in the wet season it was all under water; but the Brazorians overlooked this little inconvenience, in consideration of the inexhaustible fruitfulness of the soil. It was the beginning of March when we arrived, and yet there was already an abundance of new potatoes, beans, peas, and artichokes, all of the finest sorts and most delicate flavor.

At Brazoria, my friend and myself had the satisfaction of learning that our land-certificates, for which we had each paid a thousand dollars, were worth exactly nothing—just so much waste paper, in short—unless we chose to conform to a condition to which our worthy friends, the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company, had never made the smallest allusion.

It appeared, that in the year 1834, the Mexican Congress, had passed an act for the encouragement of emigration from the United States to Texas. In consequence of this act, an agreement was entered into with contractors, or *empresarios*, as they call them in Mexico, who had bound themselves to bring a certain number of settlers into Texas within a given time, and without any expense to the Mexican government. On the other hand, the Mexican government had engaged to furnish land to those emigrants at the rate of five square leagues to every hundred families; but to this agreement one condition was attached, and it was, that all settlers should be, and were to be, Roman Catholics. Failing this, the validity of their claims to the land was not recognized, and they were liable to be turned out any day at the point of the bayonet.

This information threw us into no small perplexity. It was clear that we had been duped, completely duped, by the rascally Land Company; that, heretofore, the Mexican government would have nothing to say to us; and that unless we chose to become converts to the Roman Church, we might whistle for our acres, and light our pipes with the certificate. Our Yankee friends at Brazoria, however, laughed at our dilemma, and told us that we were only in the same plight as hundreds of our countrymen, who had come to Texas in total ignorance of this condition, but who had not the least taken possession of their land and settled there; that they themselves were among the number, and that, although as Roman Catholics, they had no idea of being turned out of their houses and plantations; that at any rate, if the Mexicans tried to, they would reckon, to turn powder before they allowed themselves to be kicked off such an uninviting piece of soil. So, after a while, we began to think, that as we had paid our money, and come so far, we might do as others had done before us—occupy our land and wait the course of events. The next day we each bought a horse, and, mounting, as they call them there, which animals were being sent at Brazoria for next to nothing, and rode into the prairie to look for a convenient spot to settle.

These mustangs are small horses, rarely above fourteen hands high, and are descended from the Spanish breed introduced by the original conquerors of the country. During the three centuries that have elapsed since the conquest of Mexico, they have increased and multiplied to an extraordinary extent, and are to be found in vast droves in the Texan prairies, although they are now beginning to become somewhat scarce. They are taken with the lasso, concerning which instrument or weapon I will here say a word or two, no substantiating that it has often been described.

The lasso is usually from twenty to thirty feet

long, very flexible, and composed of strips of tanned ox-hide. One end is fastened to the saddle, and the other which forms a running noose, held in the hand of the hunter, who thus equipped, rides out into the prairie. When he discovers a troop of wild horses, he manoeuvres to get to the windward of them, and then to approach as near them as possible. If he is an experienced hand, the horses seldom or never escape him, and as soon as he finds himself within twenty or thirty feet of them, he throws the noose with unerring aim over the neck of the one he has selected for his prey. This done he turns his own horse short round, gives him the spur, and gallops away, dragging his unfortunate captive after him, breathless, and with his windpipe so compressed by the noose, that he is unable to make the smallest resistance, and after a few yards, falls headlong to the ground, and lies motionless and almost lifeless, sometimes indeed badly hurt and disabled. From this day forward, the horse which has thus been caught never forgets the lasso; and the mere sight of it makes him tremble in every limb; and however wild he may be, it is sufficient to show it to him, or to lay it on his neck to render him as docile as a lamb.

The horse taken, next comes the breaking in, which is effected in a no less brutal manner than his capture. The eyes of the unfortunate animal are covered with a bandage, and a tremendous bit, a pound weight or more, clapped into his mouth; the horse-breaker puts on a pair of spurs six inches long, and with towels like penknives, and jumping on his back, urges him to his very utmost speed. If the horse tries to rear, or turns restive, one pull, and not a very hard one either, is sufficient to tear his mouth to shreds, and cause the blood to flow in streams. I have myself seen a horse's teeth broken with these barbarous bits. The poor beast whinies and groans with pain and terror; but there is no help for him the spur is in his flanks, and on he goes full gallop, till he is ready to sink from fatigue and exhaustion. He then has a quarter of an hour's rest allowed him; scarcely does he begin to recover breath, which has been ridden or spurred out of his body when he is again mounted, and has to go through the same violent process as before. If he breaks down during the rude trial, he is either knocked on the head or driven away as useless; but if he holds out he is marked with a hot iron, and left to graze on the prairie. Henceforward there is no particular difficulty in catching him when wanted; the wildness of the horse is completely punished out of him, but for it is substituted the most confirmed vice and malice that it is possible to conceive. These mustangs are unquestionably the most deceitful and spiteful of all the equine race. They seem to be perpetually looking out for an opportunity of playing their master a trick; and, very soon after I got possession of mine, I was nearly paying for him in a way that I had not calculated upon.

We were going to Bolivar, and had to cross the river Brazos. I was the last but one to get into the boat, and was leading my horse carelessly by the bridle. Just as I was about to step in a sudden jerk, and a cry of "mind your beast!" made me jump on one side; and lucky it was that I did so. My mustang had suddenly sprung back, reared up, and thrown himself forward upon me with such force and fury, that as I got out of his way, his fore feet went completely through the bottom of the boat. I never in my life saw an animal in such a paroxysm of rage. He curled up his lips till his whole range of teeth was visible, his eyes literally shot fire, while the foam flew from his mouth, and he gave a wild screaming neigh that had something quite diabolical in its sound. I was standing perfectly thunder-struck at this scene, when one of the party took a lasso and very quietly laid it over the animal's neck. The effect was really magical. With closed mouth, drooping ears and head low, there stood the mustang, as meek and docile as an old jackass. The change was so sudden and comical, that we all burst out laughing; although, when I came to reflect on the danger I had run, it required all my love of horses to prevent me from shooting the brute upon the spot. Mounted upon this ticklish steed, and in company with my friend, I made various excursions to Bolivar, Marion, Columbia, Anahuac, incipient cities, consisting of from five to twenty houses. We also visited numerous plantations and clearings, to the owners of some of which we were known, or had messages of introduction; but either with or without such recommendations, we always found a hearty welcome and hospitable reception, and it was rare that we were allowed to pay for our entertainment.

We arrived one day at a clearing, which lay a few miles off to the west from San Felipe de Austin, and belonged to Mr. Neal. He had been three years in the country occupying himself with the breeding of cattle, which is unquestionably the most profitable business in Texas. He had a herd of about seven or eight hundred head of cattle, and from fifty to sixty horses. His plantation, like nearly all the plantations in Texas at that time, was as yet in a very unsettled state; and his house, although roomy and comfortable enough inside, was built of unhewn tree-trunks, in the back-woodsman style. It was situated on the border of one of the islands, or groups of trees, and stood between two gigantic sycamores, which sheltered it from the sun and wind. In front, and as far as could be seen, lay the prairie, covered with waving grass and many colored flowers; behind the dwelling arose the cluster of forest trees in all their primeval majesty, laced and bound together by an infinity of wild vines, which shot their tendrils and clinging branches hundreds of feet upward to the very top of the trees, embracing and covering the whole island with a green net-work, and converting it into an immense bower of vine leaves, which would have been an unsuitable abode for Bacchus and his train. These islands are one of the most enchanting features of Texas scenery. Of infinite variety and beauty of form, and unrivalled in the growth and magnitude of the trees that compose them, they are to be found of all shapes—circular, parallelograms, hexagons, octagons—some again twisting and winding like dark-green snakes over the brighter surface of the prairie. In no park or artificially laid out grounds, would it be possible to find any thing equalling these natural shrubberies in beauty and symmetry. In the morning, and evening, especially, when surrounded by a sort of veil of light-greyish mist, and with the horizontal beams of the rising or setting sun gleaming through them, they offer pictures which it is impossible to get weary of admiring.

Mr. Neal was a jovial Kentuckian, and he received us with the greatest hospitality, only asking in return the service we could give him from the States. It is difficult to imagine, without having witnessed it, the fervent eagerness and curiosity with which an intelligent man from their native country is sought after and listened to by these dwellers in the desert. Men, women and children crowded around us; and though we had arrived in the afternoon, it was near sunrise before we could escape from the inquiries by which we were overwhelmed, and retire to the beds that had been prepared for us.

I had not slept very long when I was roused by our worthy host. He was going out to catch twenty or thirty oxen, which were wanted for the market at New Orleans. As the kind of horses which took place after these animals is very interesting, and rarely dangerous, we willingly accepted the invitation to accompany him, and having dressed and breakfasted in all haste, got upon our mustangs and rode off into the prairie.

The party was half a dozen strong, consisting of Mr. Neal, my friend and myself, and three negroes. What we had to do was to drive the cattle, which were grazing on the prairie in herds of from thirty to fifty head, to the house, and then those which were selected for the market were to be taken with the lasso and sent off to Brazoria. After riding four or five miles, we came in sight of a drove of splendid animals, standing very high, and of most symmetrical form. The horns of these cattle are of an unusual length, and in the distance, have more the appearance of stag's antlers than bull's horns. We approached the herd first to within a quarter of a mile. They remained quite quiet. We rode round them, and in like manner got in the rear of a second and third drove, and then began to spread out, so as to form a half circle, and drive the cattle toward the house.

Hitherto my mustang had behaved exceedingly well, cantering freely along, not attempting to play any tricks. I had scarcely, however, left the remainder of the party a couple of hundred yards, when the devil by which he was possessed began to wake up. The mustangs belonging to the plantation were grazing some three quarters of a mile off; and no sooner did my beast catch sight of them, than he commenced practising every species of jump and leap that it is possible for a horse to execute, and many of a nature so extraordinary, that I should have thought no brute that ever went on four legs would have been able to accomplish them. He shied, reared, pranced, leaped forward, backward, and sideways; in short, played such infernal pranks, that although a practiced rider, I found it no easy matter to keep my seat. I began heartily to regret that I had not a lasso with me, which would have tamed him at once, and that, contrary to Mr. Neal's advice, I had put on my American bit instead of a Mexican one. Without these auxiliaries all my horsemanship was useless. The brute galloped like a mad creature some five hundred yards, caring nothing for my efforts to stop him; and then, finding himself close to the troop of mustangs, he stopped suddenly, threw his head between his forelegs, and his hind feet into the air, with such vicious violence, that I was pitched clean out of the saddle. Before I well knew where I was, I had the satisfaction of seeing him put his fore feet on the bridle, pull bit and bridle out of my mouth, and then, with a neigh of exultation, spring into the midst of the herd of mustangs.

I got up out of the long grass in a towering passion. One of the negroes who was nearest to me came galloping to my assistance, and begged me to let the beast run for a while, and that when Anthony, the huntsman, came, he would soon catch him. I was too angry to listen to reason, and I ordered him to get off his horse, and let me mount. The black begged and prayed of me not to ride after the brute; and Mr. Neal, who was some distance off, shouted to me, as loud as he could, for heaven's sake to stop—that I did not know what it was to chase a wild horse in a Texan prairie, and that I must not fancy myself in the meadows of Louisiana or Florida. I paid no attention to all this—I was in too great a rage at the trick the beast had played me, and jumping on the negro's horse, I galloped away like mad.

My rebellious steed was grazing quietly with his companions, and he allowed me to come within a couple of hundred yards of him; but just as I had prepared the lasso, which was fastened to the negro's saddle, he gave a start, and galloped off some distance further. After him. Again he made a pause, and in a mouthful of grass—then off again, or another half mile. This time I had great success in catching him, for he let a couple of hundred yards; and when I was close up to him, away he went, with one of his shrill neighs. When I galloped fast he went faster, when I rode slowly he slackened his pace. At last ten times did he let me approach him within a couple of hundred yards—without for that bringing a bit nearer getting hold of him. It was certainly high time to desist from such a mad chase, but I never dreamed of doing so; and indeed the longer it lasted, the more obstinate I got. I rode on after the beast, who kept letting me come nearer and nearer, and then darted off again with his loud laughing neigh. It was the infernal neigh that made me so savage; there was something so spiteful and triumphant in it, as though the animal knew he was making a fool of me, and exulting in so doing. At last, however, I got so sick of my horse-hunt that I determined to make a last trial, and, if that failed, to turn back. The runaway had stopped near one of the islands of trees, and was grazing quite close to its edge. I thought that if I were to creep round to the other side of the island, and then steal across it, through the trees, I should be able to throw the lasso over his head, or, at any rate, to drive him into the house. This plan I put in execution—rode round the island, then through it, lastly in hand, as softly as I had been riding over eggs. To my consternation, however, on arriving at the edge of the trees, and at the exact spot where, only a few minutes before, I had seen the mustang grazing, no signs of him were to be perceived. I made the circuit of the island, but in vain—the animal had disappeared. With a hearty exclamation, I put spurs to my horse, and started off to ride back to the plantation.

Neither the plantation, the cattle nor my companions were visible, it is true; but this gave me no uneasiness. I felt sure that I knew the direction in which I had come, and that the island, I had just left, was one which was visible from the house, while all

around me were such numerous tracts of horses, that the possibility of my having lost my way never occurred to me, and I rode on, quite unconcernedly. After riding for about an hour, however, I began to find the time rather long. I looked at my watch. It was past one o'clock. We had started at nine, and, allowing an hour and a half to have been spent in finding the cattle, I had passed nearly three hours in my wild and unsuccessful hunt. I began to think that I must have got further from the plantation than I had as yet supposed.

It was toward the end of March, the day clear and warm, just like a May-day in the Southern States. The sun was now shining brightly out, but the early part of the morning had been somewhat foggy, and as I had only arrived at the plantation the day before, and had passed the whole afternoon and evening indoors, I had no opportunity of getting acquainted with the bearings of the house. This reflection began to make me rather uneasy, particularly when I remembered the entreaties of the negro, and the loud exhortations of Mr. Neal addressed to me as I rode away. I said to myself, however, that I could not be more than ten or fifteen miles from the plantation, that I should soon come in sight of the herds of cattle, and that then there would be no difficulty in finding my way. But when I had ridden another hour or so, I got seriously uneasy.

In my impatience, I abused poor Neal for not sending somebody to find me. His huntsman, I heard say, was gone to Anahuac, and would not be back for two or three days; but he might have sent a couple of his lazy negroes. Or if he had fired a shot or two as a signal, I stopped and listened, in hopes of hearing the crack of a rifle. But the deepest stillness reigned around, scarcely the chirp of a bird was heard—all nature seemed to be taking the siesta. As far as the eye could reach was a waving sea of grass, here and there an island of trees, but not a trace of a human being. At last I thought I had made a discovery.

The nearest clump of trees was undoubtedly the same which I had admired and pointed out to my companions soon after we had left the house. It bore a fantastic resemblance to a snake coiled up and about to dart upon its prey. About six or seven miles from the plantation we had passed it on our right hand, and if I now kept it upon my left, I could not fail to be going in a proper direction. So said so done. I trotted on most perseveringly toward the point of the horizon where I felt certain the house must lie. One hour passed, then a second, then a third; every now and then I stopped and listened, but nothing was audible, not a shot nor shout. But, although I heard nothing, I saw something which gave me no great pleasure. In the direction in which we had ridden out, the grass was very abundant and the flowers scarce; whereas the part of the prairie in which I now found myself presented the appearance of a perfect flower garden, with scarcely a square foot of green to be seen. The most variegated carpet of flowers I ever beheld lay around me; red, yellow, violet, blue, every color, every tint was there; millions of the most magnificent prairie roses, asters, dahlias, and fifty other kinds of flowers. The finest artificial garden in the world would sink into insignificance when compared with this pattern of nature's own planting. My horse could scarcely make his way through the wilderness of flowers, and for a time remained lost in admiration of this scene of extraordinary beauty. The prairie in the distance looked as if clothed with rainbows, that waved to and fro over its surface.

But the difficulties and anxiety of my situation, soon banished all other thoughts, and I rode with a perfect indifference through a scene, that, under other circumstances, would have captivated my entire attention. All the stories that I had heard of misdeeds in these endless prairies, recurred in vivid coloring to my memory; not mere back-woodsman legends, but facts well authenticated by persons of undoubted veracity, who had warned me before I came to Texas, against venturing without guide or compass into these dangerous wilds. Even men who had been long in the country, were often known to lose themselves, and wander for days and weeks, over these oceans of grass, where no hill or rocky spire of surface offered a landmark to the traveller. In summer and autumn, such a position would have no danger the less, that is, there would be no risk of dying of hunger; for at these seasons the most delicious fruits, grapes, plums, peaches, and others are to be found in the prairie. But we were now in early spring, and although I saw numbers of peach and plum-trees, they were only in blossom. Of game also there was plenty, both far and feather, but I had no gun, and nothing appeared more probable than that I should die of hunger, although surrounded by food, and in one of the most fruitful countries in the world. This thought flashed suddenly across me, and for a moment my heart smote within me as I first perceived the real danger of my position.

After a time, however, other ideas came to console me. I had been already four weeks in the country, and had ridden over a large slice of it in every direction, always through prairies, and I had never had any difficulty in finding my way. True, but then I had always had a compass, and been in company. It was this sort of over-confidence and feeling of security, that had made me venture so rashly, and in spite of all warning, in pursuit of the mustang. I had not waited to reflect, that I had more than four weeks was necessary to make only acquainted with the bearings of a district three times as big as New York State. Still I thought it impossible that I should have got so far out of the right track, as not to be able to find the house before nightfall, which was now, however, rapidly approaching. Indeed, the faint glimmer of evening, strange as it may seem, gave this persuasion increased strength. Home-ward and gently nurtured as I was, my life before coming to Texas, had been by no means one of adventure, and I was so used to sleep with a roof over my head, that when I saw it getting dusk, I felt certain that I could not be far from the house. The idea fixed itself so strongly in my mind, that I involuntarily spurred my mustang, and trotted on, peering out through the fast gathering gloom, in expectation of seeing a light. Several times I lifted up my hand to the sky, and, in the twinkling of an eye, I heard the barking of the dogs, the lowing of the cattle, or the merry laugh of the children.

Suddenly there was the house at last—I see the lights in the parlor windows. I urged my horse on, but when I came near the house, it proved to be an island of trees. What I had taken for candles were fire-flies, that now issued in swarms from the dark corners of the islands, and spread themselves over the prairie, darting about in every direction, their small blue flames literally lighting up the plain, and making it appear as if I were surrounded by a sea of Bengol fire. It is impossible to conceive anything more bewildering than such a ride as mine on a warm March night, through the interminable, never-varying prairie. Over head the deep blue firmament, with its host of bright stars; at my feet, and all around, an ocean of magical light, myriads of fire-flies floating upon the soft air. To me it was like a scene of enchantment. I could distinguish every blade of grass, every flower, each leaf on the trees, but all in a way, unattended with light, and in silvery colors. The trees and flowers, prairie roses and geraniums, dahlias and vine branches, began to wave and move, to range themselves in ranks and rows. The whole vegetable world around me seemed to dance, as the swarms of living lights passed over it. Suddenly out of the sea of fire mounted a loud and long-drawn note. I stopped, listened, gazed around me.

